Home Life on Early Ranches of Southwest Texas

CHAPTER XXXV

Col. M. S. Munson

Brazoria County

By MYRTLE MURRAY

Home Industries Specialist,
Extension Service,
College Station, Texas

"MY mother and sister, Sarah, visited my mother's old home town, Memphis, Tennessee, in 1882. Mother brought back a root or cutting of a white cluster rose bush and planted it in her yard," said Judge M. S. Munson, referring to a beautiful rose bush at the South window of one of the bedrooms in his spacious two-story white house set well back on a huge, attractively landscaped lawn, in Angleton. "And this bush—a cutting from mother's rose bush, is at least 25 years old, and is still thrifty. I have other rose bushes from this cutting. The clusters sometimes have twelve buds to the cluster."

The rose blooms almost continuously.

"I sent some of the flowers and branches to a nurseryman in Tyler to see if he could tell me its name but he could not," continued Judge Munson. "However, he is trying to bud it, and if successful will give me the privilege of naming it. When, and if, he is successful it will be named the 'Sarah K. Munson Rose'. I now call it the 'Tennessee Rose'."

My two companions and I had gasped at the exquisite coloring and fragrance of the rare and beautiful water lilies that Judge and Mrs. Munson had shown us. Judge Munson cut one of the huge lily pads for us to examine more closely. As he told my companions more about the culture of water lilies in his three lily pools in the back yard, Mrs. Munson turned the lily pad over and pointed out its exquisite architectural design. Truly, the Creator is the Master Artist and Architect!

But, I am getting ahead of my story, for this is to be the story of the home life of the parents of Judge M. S. Munson, district judge of the Twenty-third Judicial District.

Just as that exquisite rose still lives, and its beauty enjoyed by the members of the Munson family and friends, so do Colonel and Mrs. Munson continue to live through the lives of their children and their children's children today.

The Stephen F. Austin colony had been established on the Brazos about four years when Mordello Stephen Munson was born in Liberty county, Texas, in 1825. His father, Henry W., and Uncle Micajah had moved there from Mississippi, but they were dissatisfied because of the overflows of the Trinity River. A friend of theirs, J. Iiams, wrote the following letter to Stephen F. Austin (from Stephen F. Austin's papers):

J. Iiams to Austin

Canja Cinto January 29th, 1825

"dear Sir

Messrs Henry and Micajah Munson living at present on this side trinity and being somewhat disappointed in their Settlement by the overflow of that River desire me to enquire of you whether they can be admitted into your Colony and obtain the title of Land.

If they can be admitted they wish to have Lands near me on Cedar buyo where there are no other Claims and they will commence settlement Immediately. They are men of Respectability having each a family and about 17 slaves each with good stock of cattle etc., etc. They also wish to enquire whether more Land can be granted in proportion to the number of Slaves. They will in all probability be good pay for whatever Land may be granted them and I shall be happy in having them for neighbours please write me a line on the above subject and if they will be accepted direct the survey as they are desireous to have it accomplished There are others wishing to apply in the same way if any more grants can be made

J. Iiams"

Col. S. F. Austin

In response to this letter, Colonel Stephen F. Austin invited them into his colony where, right from the first, they were recognized as men to be relied upon for the promotion of any good community enterprise and to help maintain law and order. They established homes near Peach Point on Gulf Prairie in what is now Brazoria county. They engaged in the cattle industry and also raised cotton and corn.

There young Mordello, a son of Henry W. Munson, grew up. He learned early to be a good marksman, both with his bow and arrow and with his gun. Roping wild cattle and horses and fishing were great sports. But, young Mordello derived another joy and satisfaction from his trips through the woods that colored his entire life. Hunting was not only great sport for him and his early companions, but he learned to know the various wild animals that inhabited that region by sight; knew their haunts and something about their habits; knew the ones that were harmful and those that were especially good for food. Among these were the bear, deer, geese, quail, wild turkey and ducks. He loved the various birds, their soft and colorful plumage and their songs. There were the mocking birds, red birds, red-winged blackbirds, starlings, blue jays, orioles, whip-poor-wills and the brilliant and delicate humming birds.

The wild birds flitting among the wild flowers on the prairies fringed with trees and rivers was a never to be forgotten scene. "The grandeur of the enchanting landscape which the country presents, inspires the soul with sensations not to be found in any other region," according to the published travels of Lewis and Clark.

"The mildness of the climate tends in some degree to soften the feelings of man and render him more like a natural human being," wrote Stephen F. Austin to his sister, Mrs. Perry, before she moved to Texas.

Perhaps the natural beauty and interesting wild life and mild climate did help to bring out the best of human qualities. Because the love of native beauty was so closely intertwined with sturdy reliant traits of character of Mordello S. Munson that they were inseparable. And throughout his colorful life his love and reverence for the soil was evidenced.

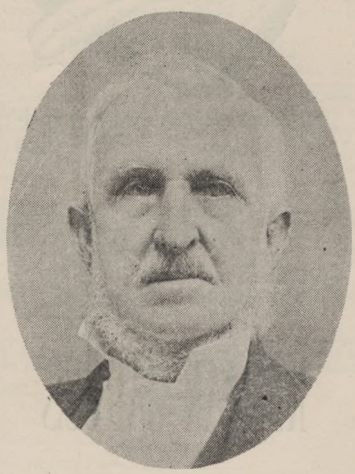
Although young Mordello loved the ranch and plantation, he wanted to study law, so he took a course at Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and afterwards attended the First Methodist School established at Rutersville, Fayette County, Texas.

"I did not do much while there except to combat the Indians on the frontier," he declared smilingly, when recalling that period of his youth.

He was among the first to graduate from that institution. Later he attended La Grange College in Alabama, and graduated with honors at the University of Kentucky at Lexington. Next he studied law in New Orleans. Upon returning to Texas he was admitted to the bar.

Col. Munson practiced law in Brazoria and adjoining counties for thirty years. But his activities as a lawyer, a stockman and a planter were so closely intertwined that he could easily be classified as any one of the three. Although he lived in many places while attending school, he always planned to establish

MRS. M. S. MUNSON



M. S. MUNSON

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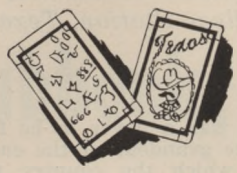

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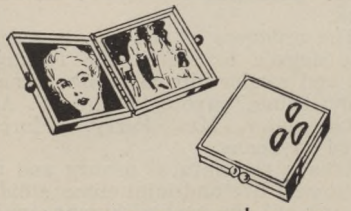

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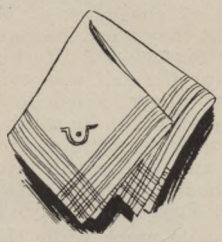

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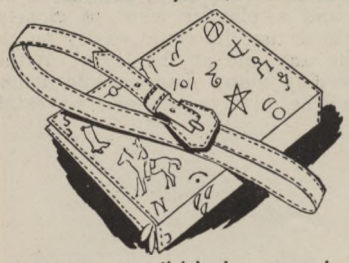

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his home in Brazoria county. He loved Texas. It was claimed that there was more land in cultivation and more wealth in Brazoria county between 1840-1850 than in all the rest of Texas. It was a country with a future, and he expected to be a contributing factor in helping it mould its future.

So, when he met the beautiful and accomplished Sarah K. Armour, a native of Tennessee, who had moved to Texas with her mother, he lost no time in persuading her to share his future.

They were married February 6, 1850. Triumphantly he had won his greatest case thus far. They started housekeeping in a house that had been built on the edge of Bailey's Prairie for Mr. Munson's brother, William. William and his wife lived on the place and died there leaving this property to M. S. Munson. Later he acquired other property and built a home at another place on the ranch.

The Munsons spent many happy hours planning the house for their permanent home. In 1855 they built a long, rambling ranch house, containing four bedrooms, a living room and a dining room. A hall with a "puncheon floor" connected the main house with the kitchen in the back yard. There was also another house called "the office" which contained two bedrooms where later the boys slept. Slave quarters were grouped conveniently nearby for the slaves, who worked in and near the house. As Mr. Munson prospered he bought more land, and gradually built a string of slave quarters at places convenient for work over the ranch.

Expanded Cattle Operations

He loved his cattle and horses that kept fat on the rich native grass. There was an abundant water supply in the Brazos and its tributaries. The stock required very little care except for rounding up and branding. As the years passed he improved his Red Durhams.

As fast as he could clear new land he increased the number and size of his fields of corn and cotton. Only a fair price was received for cotton, but it was practically clear profit. The plowing, planting and harvesting was done by slave labor. The gin was built in a field that later was referred to as "the gin house field."

Mr. Munson organized his slaves for the various kinds of work. Rafe, a negro slave, was the general manager of all the work, and Mr. Munson held him responsible. Rafe issued instructions to two main foremen—one who had charge of the stock, and the other who had charge of the farming operations. Rafe would get the negroes started to work, then he would go hunting or fishing.

While Mr. Munson was busy with his law practice, seeing after his rapidly increasing cattle and directing the farming operations, Mrs. Munson was busy organizing the work of her home activities. One slave was trained to cook and serve family meals and "company meals" on an elaborate scale, for the Munsons were noted for their gracious hospitality. Some of the slaves scoured the wool, carded wool and cotton into bats, and did the spinning. Others were trained to dye the thread and weave it into cloth. Still others did the washing and ironing. Soap was made with homemade lye, and the ironing was done with sad irons. As the babies came, a slave was trained as a nurse for it. Certain ones of the slaves were trained seamstresses and made clothes for the slaves of homespun ma-

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terials, cloth was purchased from Houston from which clothes were made for the members of the Munson family.

The Munsons "lived abundantly at home" on fresh fruits and vegetables in season; milk, butter and eggs; fresh beef, pork and venison could be had any time Mrs. Munson wanted it. These animals roamed over the boundless prairies and bottoms, unfenced. Then, too, the smokehouse was full of cured meats and fruit preserves. Some items including flour, coffee, sugar, medicines, etc., had to be bought. They were always purchased in big quantities. Flour and coffee could be bought by the barrel or by the sack. One time Mr. Munson ordered a large quantity of flour from Houston. Several sacks were sent down.

"I want flour by the barrel, not by sack," he said, and returned the sacks of flour.

Supplies were transported from Houston to Oyster Creek Station—the station that served the Munson place. This railroad was built from Houston to Columbia, a distance of about fifty miles. At first the train consisted of one coach operated by mule power. Relay stations were provided at regular intervals so the mules could be changed. Later a steam engine was used. The first day that the train was pulled into Oyster Station by the steam engine, people came for miles around. They had gathered to see the newest means of rapid transportation. Just as it approached the platform the conductor pulled the whistle cord. As it shrieked the people stampeded in the opposite direction.

But, that train was important! It enabled the people to get supplies from Houston, which would have been impossible at times because of excessively muddy roads. The genial conductor was accommodating. He would stop the train any place along the route for passengers to gather wild blackberries and to buy butter and eggs. It was affectionately called, by the people of that section "the Tri-weekly," because it came down from Houston one day and tried to make it back the next. This road is now a part of the Missouri and Pacific and is still in operation.

Joined the Confederacy

The Munsons were happy and prosperous when the war between the States started. Mr. Munson enlisted almost immediately.

"I started with the war and I was with General Lee at the surrender," he declared. Colonel Munson, as he was always called after the war, and Mrs. Munson were real partners in business as well as in the home. Therefore, it was natural for her to attend to the farm and ranch activities while he was away. As she wrote him he could picture the activities in his own home. And just as he had been eager to "get home" at the close of his day's work ever since he married, he was now eager to get home to her and the children. He served with distinction throughout the war. He was an officer in Waul's Brigade.

Colonel Munson had been a gallant soldier, but his wife had been fully as brave. She had managed the cattle and farming operations so well and kept the home bright and cheerful for her five small children. With all her extra responsibilities she had found time to continue their studies, and to read stories to them. She taught them their "ABC's" from the capital letters of the beginning of the chapters in the Bible. Then they were promoted to the Blue Back speller. The children looked forward to the evenings when she would read Pilgrim's Progress and fairy stories aloud to them. Thus, with simple but entertaining pastimes, she instilled in her children principles of honesty and an appreciation for the best and most beautiful things in life, morals and adventure—bravery. On Sunday mornings she gathered her children around her, and told them Bible stories and they sang together. Then she added to her prayer a fervent plea for the safe return of her husband and her children's father.

Colonel Munson knew things would be different when he returned home. He realized before he left the army something about the reconstruction problems that might arise, so he bought a plantation in Mexico, near Tuxpam, and was prepared to move there in case it should become necessary. He sent machinery down and had a sugar mill built.

It was grand to be at home again with his wife and babies. But there were plenty of problems of the reconstruction period that tried the souls of men. Some of his slaves left. Many of them who left returned later, and many of them did not leave. Rafe stayed "at home with my white folks."

Colonel Munson did not move to Mexico, and his plantation in Mexico never became a profitable investment. He operated a schooner between Galveston and Tuxpam, sending supplies to the plantation there and bringing products and supplies from there to his place in Brazoria county. He brought from Mexico many tropical plants, including bananas and oranges, and planted them on the home place. He became interested in the native birds and brought many of them back. Among these were a variety of Mexican birds, including several "Chachalas," and a noted bird which he called "Chief" or pheasant but it was really "The crested carisa," the male being black with a beautiful crest. They were about the size of a large turkey.

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He was a busy man, taking care of his increasing cattle, horses, his expanding farming operations, and his growing law practice.

But best of all he enjoyed being at home with his family. In addition to his own family of boys and girls, he and Mrs. Munson reared six of his nieces and nephews; children of the two brothers. And in the evenings they would all gather around the fireside and listen to Mrs. Munson read, or sing while Emma played the organ or listen to Colonel Munson tell stories. The children never tired of hearing him tell about how he fought the Indians when he was a student at college in Rutersville. He told them about being a member of the Mier expedition under the command of General Somerville. The children and Mrs. Munson always breathed a sigh of gratitude that he was not a Mier prisoner. Upon his return trip his party became lost. "Flaco" an Indian chief of the Lipans joined them.

"Flaco, do you know the way out?" asked one of the party.

"Yes," he grunted.

"Well, why don't you show us the way out?" demanded the party.

"Me no guide," grunted Flaco. They appointed him guide and he did lead them out upon a high mound and pointed to the Nueces River in the distance and indicated that was the way out.

Sometimes he told them about his life in the Confederate Army. The Confederate and Union soldiers would sometimes exchange tobacco when they were not fighting. And when the war was over and they started home afoot, he heard a Union soldier invite a "Reb," as they termed the Confederates, who was afoot to ride behind him.

He also told them about the one time he actually saw "Bailey's light." Bailey's Prairie was named for Brit Bailey, an early character in that community about whom many colorful tales have been told. It is said that in his will be requested to be buried standing up, face to the West with his shot gun in one hand and jug of whiskey between his feet. Tradition says that his request was complied with.

Some years after his death when a strange light was seen apparently coming from the general direction of the grave near a frog pond, those who were inclined to be superstitious, connected it with his peculiar request for his burial, and thus arose the legend of "Bailey's light."

One evening Colonel Munson and his brother George were sitting in front of the fireplace talking when all at once they saw a reflection of light above the mantel. Jumping to their feet and going to the porch they saw a light going in an easterly direction. They stood still watching it as their horses were being saddled. They mounted and followed it for two miles, then ran it for five miles. They realized they could not overtake it, and watched it until it disappeared in the timber.

Colonel Munson enjoyed hunting and always kept a pack of well trained dogs. The children always enjoyed hearing him tell stories about one of his favorite dogs, Roso.

One day he went to Columbia to buy a pair of boots accompanied by Roso. He tried some on in the Adriance store, but they did not fit very well.

"Just put them under the counter until I can go down the street and see if I can find some that will fit better," he said to Mr. Adriance. "If I don't find them I will come back for these."

Mr. Adriance laid them under the counter as requested.

After looking at another place and failing to find any that fitted better, said:

"Roso, go find me a pair of number eight boots."

Roso went to Mr. Adriance's store, got the boots from under the counter that Colonel Munson had tried on, and brought them to him.

Roso was invaluable on deer hunts, and always kept in front of his master and trailed the deer. The Colonel used a cap gun primed with powder and put on a cap. One time he trailed a deer in a back field about one and a half miles from home. Finding that he was without powder, he wrote a note to Mrs. Munson and gave it to the dog.

"Roso, take this note to Mrs. Munson, and bring me some powder," he said.

In due time Roso returned with a horn full of powder, and Colonel Munson killed the deer.

Gave Each Schooling

As the children were old enough they were sent away to school. George and Henry attended the Texas Military Institute in Austin. Emma and Sarah attended a private school in Houston. As Sarah grew older she taught her younger brothers and cousins who lived with them. A room in the yard which had been used for a servant's room was set aside for "the schoolroom." And as they were old enough, some of them attended public school, after which they too were sent away to school.

The Munsons were devoted Methodists, and Sunday was really observed as the Sabbath day. During the week Mrs. Munson played with her children and entered into their sports with a zest that equalled theirs. Horseback riding was one of her favorite sports. But on Saturday the entire family got ready for Sunday. The servants pressed clothes, shined the shoes, and baked hams or turkey (or whatever meat the family preferred) and cakes and pies. The children put away their bows and arrows, stilts and other play equipment. They could play games on Sunday that did not require equipment. If possible, they attended church services at Columbia, six miles away.

When Colonel Munson was at home, he and the boys enjoyed hunting bear, deer, wild turkey, prairie chickens and ducks. One of their great sports was that of hunting wild cats or "bob cats" and the entire family fished together.

As the children grew older the doors of the Munson home were always open to their friends. Colonel and Mrs. Munson did not dance, but they enjoyed watching their young folks as they glided gracefully over the floor to the calls of the square dance, the Virginia Reel, and to the music of the lovely old waltzes.

Christmas was a great time for celebration. There was a Christmas tree at the Munson home followed by a dance. And on Christmas morning everybody enjoyed egg nog, a traditional Christmas custom. Roast turkey was a favorite dish for Christmas, also venison, wild turkey and prairie chicken, cakes and pies galore. The negroes on the plantation came up and saw the tree and had

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egg nog, then returned to their quarters for their own celebration.

The members of the family were great readers of the best literature. They frequently attended the operas and good plays in Houston.

They attended the barbecues in the community, given by the Prairie Rangers, an organization whose purpose was to rid the country of cattle thieves. There was an organization of this kind on each side of the Brazos.

Cattle Thieves Checked

But underneath the gaiety of the Munson children there was a seriousness of purpose. Each was assuming responsibilities for himself, and for the community, as opportunities arose. Henry W., the oldest child, became captain of the Rangers on his side of the river while Joseph Waddy, his younger brother, became first lieutenant. Although Henry W. was a graduate of the Texas Military Institute, he attended Texas A. & M. College, a new school at that time, to take some additional training in order to be a more efficient officer. Cattle thieves were a real menace. Through his organization he rendered a distinctive service to his country in helping to stamp out the thieves.

Colonel and Mrs. Munson enjoyed watching the children develop their interests and helping them when needed. Henry and George were interested in cattle. They formed a partnership and bought two thousand acres of land between the Brazos River and Oyster Creek. They were rapidly becoming prominent cattlemen. Emma and Sarah were charming young women. Armour was gradually assuming more responsibility of the home ranch. Waddy, Bascom and Stephen were interested in law.

Waddy entered Texas A. & M. College for the term of 1877-1878 during President Gathright's administration—the first president of that college. But he had a severe case of pneumonia and had to leave school. Several years later he entered the State University and received his degree in law in the same class with his two younger brothers, Bascom and Stephen. Soon afterwards, all three of the boys were admitted to the bar.

T. A. Munson, a grandson of Col. M. S. Munson and a member of the faculty of the Department of Civil Engineering, Texas A. & M. College, has among his priceless possessions the list of twenty-six questions submitted to his father, Waddy Munson, when he took the examination for admittance to the bar.

Colonel Munson had ably represented his district three times in the State Legislature. He was a member of the Legislature during Governor Sam Houston's administration. He had long been recognized as one among the foremost jurists of the State. He had always been recognized as one of the staunchest supporters of law and order. But he had always identified himself closely to the soil. And now that he was getting older, he decided to retire from his law practice and devote his entire time to his cattle and farming interests. He wanted to devote more time to the companionship of his family. He had accumulated enough of this world's goods so that he could afford for his family many of the luxuries that were available at that time.

He built a large summer home on the Gulf of Mexico, about two hundred yards from the water, opposite "Bryan's Mound" where sulphur was later mined by the Freeport Sulphur Company. The trip of about twenty-five miles, to spend the summer on the beach, became an annual affair. Early in the summer supplies were sent overland with four-mule-team wagons from home to the beach house. The entire family went in buggies and on horse back in June and returned in October, in time for the harvest season. Later, another large house was built nearby to accommodate the growing families and other guests.

In the meantime George had married Hannah D. Adriance, and they were living on the ranch. Emma had become the wife of Reverend J. L. Murray, a Methodist minister, and Sarah had married Walter Kennedy, a farmer.

So Colonel and Mrs. Munson spent many happy hours together in pleasant companionship reviving happy memories with ill will toward none, and kindness toward all. They had time to read and discuss what they read. Mrs. Munson crocheted and knitted for her children and grandchildren, and enjoyed her flowers. Colonel Munson devoted much of his time to the growing of choice shrubs and his orchard.

Mrs. Munson passed away December 31, 1886. Colonel Munson continued to live in the old home, loved and honored by his children, grandchildren and a host of friends until he joined his wife in 1903. "Well done thou good and faithful servants," was the unanimous opinion of those who loved them.

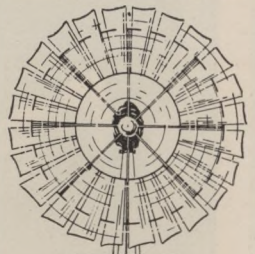
George Munson, a grandson, owns and lives on the old home place, although the house is not on the original location. Several of the Munson grandsons have been, and still are, well known cattlemen.

The lands acquired by Colonel Munson in Brazoria county are still owned by his descendants. A title of land has never yet passed from the Munson family. And the lands are still used for agricultural and ranching purposes. Types of his horses and cattle have passed down through the years. And the present livestock are descendants of the original strain of good blood.

Only two of Colonel Munson's children are still living—they are Judge M. S. (Stephen), who is district judge of the Twenty-third Judicial District, and W. B. (Bascom) Munson, a lawyer, banker and stockman, living in San Antonio.

The children of Colonel and Mrs. M. S. Munson were as follows: Henry W. Munson, stockman and farmer, married Kate Cahill; George C. Munson, stockman and farmer, married Hanah D. Adriance; Emma, married Rev. J. L. Murray, a Methodist preacher; Sarah, married Walter Kennedy, a farmer; Joseph Waddy, a lawyer at Columbus and Angleton, married Mary West; Hillen Armour, married Lilla Cox, and managed his father's ranch; Walter Bascom, lawyer, banker, cattleman, married Addie Cotton and lives in San Antonio; Milam Stephen, lawyer, and at present district judge, married Carrie Diggs, and lives in Angleton.

WINDMILLS



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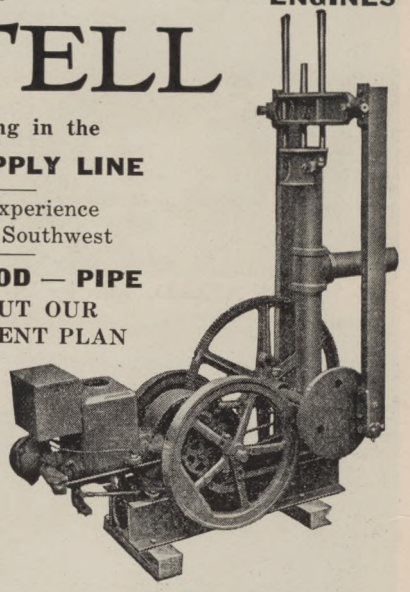

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